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A Theologian Looks at Urban Mission

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A Theologian Looks at Urban Mission

by PROFESSOR YOSHINOBU KUMAZAWA

I have been asked to express my views as a theologian on the problem of urban mission. No doubt in this study group you will, on another occasion, be permitted to see the problem from the viewpoint of a social scientist. Preliminary to a consideration of urban evangelism, it is necessary to say a word about our understanding of *evangelism* as such.

I can at this point do little other than outline my own understanding very briefly. I understand evangelism or *mission* essentially as *koinonia*. This comes of course from my understanding of the essence of God the Trinity as koinonia. God in his essential being is a fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Further, God's work of creation and redemption is directed toward making it possible for his creatures to share in the fellowship which is his essential nature. In this understanding, *mission* can be defined as the work of God enabling his creatures to share in this fellowship. Therefore mission is seen essentially as God's mission. The church in its turn then is an instrument of God serving his mission through a ministry of *kerygma*, *didache* and *diakonia* (preaching, teaching and healing). It is with this understanding as background that I will use the words evangelism or mission.

What is Urban Evangelism?

In a study group such as this, it probably is unnecessary to raise the question, "What is urban evangelism?" However, in view of the confusion that seems to exist in local churches regarding this question, I would like to discuss the matter briefly from what seems to be the two prevailing viewpoints at present. First of all there is the approach which sees urban evangelism simply as "evangelism in the city." This is seen as a contrasting view to rural evangelism which we normally regard as

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"evangelism in the country." From this point of view the general reaction to any suggestion that the National Christian Council become especially involved in urban evangelism is, "The Japanese church is already concentrated almost entirely in the cities. Don't forget there are also rural areas!"

This view of urban evangelism I feel is very much in error and I would like to turn now to a view that I consider much more valid and constructive. Urban evangelism in this definition is "evangelism in the midst of the urbanization phenomenon." As I have already explained, I understand evangelism as involving the study of what it means to participate in God's mission as earlier defined. Thinking of urban evangelism in these terms as evangelism in the midst of the urbanization process, we see that it cannot simply be limited to "evangelism in the city." The urban phenomenon extends to suburban and rural areas and makes its impact there also. So *urban evangelism* in this definition is relevant to rural areas as well. It is urgent that the NCC concern itself with urban evangelism on a national basis beyond denominational limitations.

The Theological Problem

The theological problem however arises at this point. Here again we find wide and varied opinions in the local churches. The best known argument against the view of urban evangelism presented above is perhaps that which is based on Hebrews 13:8 "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (RSV) It is argued here that the gospel is unchanging, eternal. The urban phenomenon in contrast is forever changing—it is temporal. The gospel we proclaim is eternal—the church is foolish to allow itself to be swayed by anything as impermanent, as temporal as the urban phenomenon! Some critics go as far as to say that evangelism in Japan fails to show results because the church is too much diverted by such things as the urban phenomenon, industrialization, etc. These people see concern for temporal change as apostasy diverting us from our real task of proclaiming the eternal gospel.

It seems to me that there are several ways of countering this position. In the first place the idea of dividing *time* and *eternity* into two categories claiming for eternity the quality of truth, and denying it to the time category, is extremely Greek, not a bit Hebrew at all! Therefore it is not really a biblical pattern of thought. Because this kind of thinking was accepted as reasonable in Greek philosophy, here no concept of history emerged. On the other hand the truth we find in the Bible may be

A young minister worked in a steel mill for several months to acquaint himself with the daily life and problems of the area.

defined as a truth become temporal. Biblical truth is concerned with time and therefore is a truth that gives birth to history. This meaning is exemplified in such words as "the creation of heaven and earth." The exodus from Egypt, God's covenant with Israel, the incarnation of the Son of God, the history of redemption—all these things illuminate the facts that biblical truth is truth that is concerned with the *events* of time, a truth that makes history and works through history. Therefore, to divide time and eternity, and see truth as pertaining to only one of these categories is not in effect biblical at all.

Eternity as Contemporality

However, if the meaning of eternal as expressed in such verses of the Bible as "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," or "Heaven and earth will pass away but my word abides forever," is not to be interpreted in this way, then the problem arises, what exactly does eternal mean in the sense in which it is used here? To help us come closer to the biblical meaning of eternal I would like to introduce a new

word here, *dojisei* or in English *contemporality*. Eternity in the Bible is in effect synonomous with time, it is contemporality. The fact that Jesus does not change yesterday, today or tomorrow is here interpreted to mean that Jesus is actually present in any age of history we care to choose. Jesus is contemporary. This is a confession of faith! He was here yesterday, he is here today, and will be in the midst of tomorrow as well. Therefore eternity in the biblical sense is contemporality. God was spoken of as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In other words he did not change, he was contemporary to all three! That this contemporary God is the Lord of history constitutes a central claim of the Bible. For this reason, in modern usage, I believe it would be better to read contemporality instead of eternity in the case of the Bible.

Approaching urban evangelism from this point, we must witness to the fact that the contemporality of God, the *presence of Jesus* are pertinent facts in the midst of the change of our time. Speaking historically, if the early Christians had persisted in the claim that only in the Temple of Jerusalem was God to be found, the church would never have penetrated the Hellenistic world at all. The way was opened for Christianity to become a world faith when the early Christians discovered that God was also present in the Hellenistic world. Similarly, unless the modern church witnesses to the presence of the contemporary Christ in the urban industrial society of our time, its witness will have no real effect or significance. Further, we must realize that, in the terms of our history, the urban, industrial society is the new world *we* must face, and a faith reasonable for this new world cannot be divorced from history.

If the gospel then is eternal in the sense of being contemporal, it is imperative that we concern ourselves with the change of our time. As Professor Hans Berg of Hamburg University has said, "God's work is performed in the midst of the changes in the world." God is a living God and his work is revealed in the change itself. This I see as an expression in slightly different terms of what I have described as God's contemporality. Therefore, in considering the theological foundation for urban mission, we counter the statement that "the gospel is eternal and you shouldn't spend your time gawking at the changes of the world," with the question, what does being eternal actually mean?

Man As the Key

We now turn to the question, "What is the urban phenomenon?" I am conscious at this point that I am purely an amateur and really

have no right to speak. Any detailed discussion must be left to the social scientists. However, this problem has many facets and we must discuss it briefly. If I may be forgiven for referring to a book I myself translated, Dr. Lieffer in his *Introduction to Urban Mission* mentions at the outset several elements in the social change of our time — for instance, the revolutionary technological changes, the population explosion, the concentration of population in the cities, rapid advances in transportation and communications, the democratization of education, the energy revolution, anti-colonialism, the tendency toward the welfare state, etc. I feel that somewhere in all of these problems we ought to be able to find a central focus — a *key* to the urban phenomenon! Here I think we must state the phenomenon in theological terms. Essentially, it is the problem of man. It is, after all, as we put *man* in the center of our thought, that the above listed changes are seen as *problems*. We are concerned about the many aspects of the urban phenomenon because they do in fact touch intimately on our human life and problems. Insofar as this is true, then these things must be considered legitimate problems for the church. We have come here to a focal point in the way we look at things. We are faced with the problem of how man's life is provided, how it will change? The focal point for us will be where this urban phenomenon touches on the life of man. The problem for urban evangelism will be that of how the gospel which we believe and proclaim is to be brought to bear on man's problems in this urban technological age.

Baptism As Point of Unity for Mission

If the church is to witness to the presence of Christ and the contemporality of the gospel in the midst of the urban phenomenon, then I think it is inevitable that restructuring will be necessary and this brings us to our fourth problem. I can again only touch on this very briefly at this point. I have discussed it more fully in *Urbanization and the Church* published recently by the United Church of Christ in Japan Publishing House. In the first Asian Faith and Order Conference, as I understand it, modern problems come to be seen from a different focal point. The emphasis shifted from Faith and Order to Mission and Structure. At this point I feel that this Hong Kong (EACC) conference was extremely valuable. Faith and Order aimed at Christian unity by starting from our differences and moving on from there. An attempt was made to clarify the points of difference in the content of faith,

Baptism and the acceptance of new members takes place at Christmas time in many Japanese churches, commemorating the birth of a new life of hope and love through faith in Jesus Christ.

evangelism and general practice of the various denominations. It was then considered how these differences might be dealt with successfully. Put in another way, this method started from the past and in this context sought to anticipate the problems of the future. In this sense it was very much past-oriented. In the case of Mission and Structure, rather than starting with our disunity, we start with what the church undersands as its unity. The point of unity is found in baptism — all Christians are baptized in the name of God the Trinity. Other points of unity may also be suggested but baptism provides the main jumping-off point.

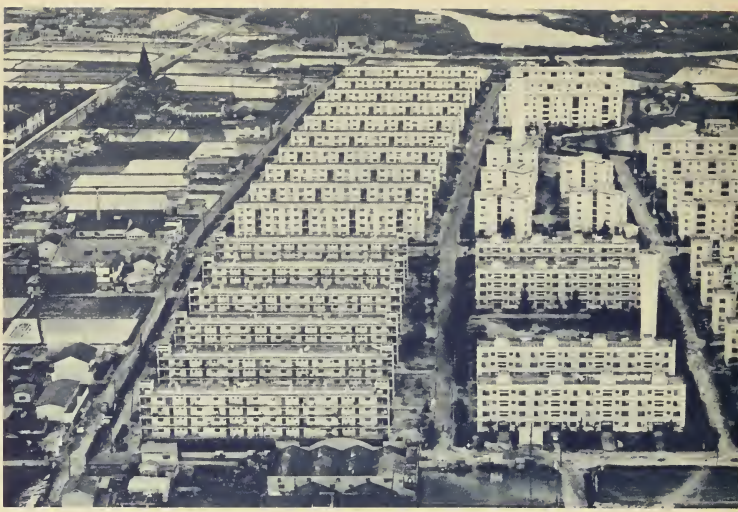
Turning to the problem of the laity here, we recall that baptism is the foundation stone of Martin Luther's thought regarding the priesthood of all believers. All Christians are priests because all have been baptized and by that baptism have become members of the People of God. To Martin Luther baptism included ordination in its meaning. All Christians are understood to have been ordained as priests by virtue of their baptism. Recently we are coming to see the significance of this understanding in its ecumenical implications. If to receive baptism is to be ordained a priest, and if this means that we become by virtue of this, the People of God (See I Peter 2:9,10) then baptism is no mere

initiation ceremony. Certainly it is not an initiation ceremony making us members of a certain denominaton. Baptism means becoming the People of God. Therefore, since all Christians are members of the People of God, we already have unity. Further, as the People of God we share in a common mission. Our unity is unity in the performance of this mission. Our problem now is the specific meaning of this mission in the context of our modern world.

This problem takes on great importance when we think in terms of evangelism in the midst of the urban phenomenon. We have already emphasized that mission is the mission of God. God is advancing his work in the midst of history, he is at work in all the change we see around us. In other words, he is continually active, inviting men to share in the koinonia of God. As part of that koinonia, we become members of the People of God, and it is demanded of God's people that they participate in the mission of God. Beyond the differences of the denominations to which we belong is the fact that we have all been baptized in the name of the trinitarian God and are therefore all members of the People of God. Mission is a demand made of us all! It is from this understanding that we must look at the problem of disunity. It is imperative that we deal with anything that stands in the way of our common participation in that mission.

Mission in the Danchi

Now let us turn to a specific problem. One aspect of the urbanization process in Japan is the development of large danchi (apartment-house areas). This is going on at breakneck pace. There are danchi with up to 200,000 people in them. Many thousands of people move rapidly into these danchi as they are completed, and for them a *new life* begins—a *new town* comes into being. In these huge danchi there is bound to be a fair percentage of Christians. These people after their move find themselves far from the churches to which they belong. It becomes extremely difficult for them to carry on church activities as in the past. Eventually, they start a Bible study group in their own area. In most cases a group of this nature will include people from several denominations. The main reason for their coming together in this way is that they are all Christians residing in the same area. The problem now is no longer between Christians of different denominations, much more obvious are the differences between Christians as a whole and non-Christians. The matter of denominational connection no longer seems



as important. All become one on the basis that all are Christians. All can study the Bible, pray and enjoy fellowship together. Gradually members of the group invite the best of their friends to share in it. A new problem emerges when for the first time one of the new participants feels the desire to become Christian. Of what church should he become a member? His friends of course would quite naturally like to introduce him to their own church, but because of the circumstances they hesitate to do so. Therefore, in spite of his desire to become Christian and share in the life of a church, no progress is made at this point. Here we are certainly face to face with the realities of our disunity. The work of God is already started — people are being called into God's people as Christians. When we seek to share in this work of God under such circumstances, we feel deeply the burden of our denominationalism.

Structural Reform

However, we are at least here approaching the problem of disunity from a standpoint of unity. For the first time we are not aiming at unity by clarifying historical differences but rather we are approaching the problem of disunity from the standpoint of our unity in mission.

Apartment cities that house thousands of workers and their families replace farm-houses and fragile one-story homes and stores.

This approach, rather than starting from the past starts from mission — it is in effect *future*, not *past*, oriented. Here we leave the position that so long prevailed in Faith and Order discussions — our problem now centers around the adequacy of present church structures in permitting our full participation in the mission of God!

The style of living in danchi or indeed in any sphere of our new industrial society is very different from that in the type of society within which the so-called *parish-structure* was suitable. Whether we speak of the danchi or the work place, the story is the same. "Christians as a whole," not as members of denominations are involved in this new pattern of living. For example, a Bible class in a downtown Tokyo factory is attended by about 13 people. Salvation Army, Holiness, Lutheran, Anglican, United Church of Christ etc. all are represented. Recently, two Roman Catholics joined the group with the permission of their priest. No member of *Mukyokai* (non-church Christians) is included but we have here a new reality in that denominations as widely separated as the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Church are represented in this one group. Here we see the beginning of something new! Is the church prepared to assume a posture adequate to meet

these new realities of our time? What exactly is the mission given to the church? Are we prepared to participate fully as God's people in the mission of God?

If we are not at present prepared, then what kind of structure can we evolve that will permit us to share in God's mission in our time? The problem of Faith and Order is being considered anew in the form of Mission and Structure. At Hong Kong, two approaches which have long been evident in the World Council of Churches, one extremely church-centered, the other, a very practical approach, were brought together. At this point the Asian churches have, I feel, a real contribution to make to the churches of the world. However, if further progress is to be made at this point, then we must approach urban evangelism from this point of view. The problem of structure is bound to arise. I'm not sure exactly what relationship this may have to structural reform in the NCC but we certainly must have a structure adequate enough to permit us to meet the challenge of mission.

Church Membership in an Age of Mobility

Next, I would like to touch further on the problem of church membership. The urban phenomenon involves a great deal of mobility. I am not sure of exact figures here but I am told that in America, where it used to be normal for a person to move perhaps five times during the course of his life, he now moves many more times. With the development of transportation facilities, man's activities tend to cover a wider area. This mobility is bound to increase as time goes on. Again we are faced with the problem as to whether the church's present methods of dealing with the situation are suitable or not. Exact statistical studies are essential for understanding at this point. A great number of laymen are lost to the church because of this increased mobility. Statistics in 1966 showed that there are 1,620 churches in the United Church of Christ. On an average, four new people are baptized in these churches each year. The average increase in membership shown however is only three — one member disappears each year! This applies to all our churches and is a yearly occurrence. On an average, one of our churches would have 69 communicant members. Of this number 20 are non-resident. These members no longer share in communion but they do retain their membership in the church. This amounts to roughly one-third of the total communicant members and is an unduly large number. These people presumably live in areas where they can no longer conveniently attend

The monorail takes passengers from downtown Tokyo to the airport.

their own church. This is a big problem but even this is not the whole story. There are also *members* kept on a separate list — this is composed entirely of dead wood. These people are completely inactive. On an average, a church will have about 36 such *members*. This is a number corresponding to about half the communicant membership, and there is practically no contact with these people at all. Such a situation indicates very clearly that the church is not really facing up to the new urban situation. We just carry on as always, therefore members quickly disappear, go on the separate list, or we simply lose track of them. Is it good enough just to leave things as they are?

Dual Membership?

As a study group I think we should devote further time to this problem. It seems to me that we have a real possibility here of considering double membership. From the prevailing thought pattern in the church today, this would pose a considerable problem. However, in actual fact, one person today lives in several spheres of life. At the same time as living in a danchi he also belongs to a work place. Further, the danchi and the workshop have absolutely no relationship. That is as spheres of life, they are independent and different. Further, he belongs completely to both of these spheres. If the church relates itself only to one of them, then it will touch only on half of his life. Is it not possible here to think in terms of *double membership?* I understand that this, in a sense, is already taking place in the case of the Roman Catholic Church. For instance, the student population is extremely mobile. On graduation of course they move again. Students therefore are registered not as members of a parish church but as of the diocese (kyoku). This is a very mobile arrangement for the student can share in church life in the place most convenient for him to do so. Further, there are priests who devote themselves entirely to work among students. There are also worker priests in the Roman Catholic Church. It seems to me that, in this matter of dealing with life as a whole, with adapting church

Meiji Gakuin University, set in the midst of the enormous city of Tokyo.

life to new patterns of living among men, the Roman Catholic Church is a step ahead of us. We have certainly reached the stage where we must give more thought to these things.

The News of God's World

Another problem I have been thinking about a great deal lately is that of the place of announcements in church. I feel that the way these are handled in most Japanese churches is very poor. In some churches announcements are made after the benediction is pronounced. It is thought that announcements destroy the atmosphere of worship — if there are too many then the solemnity of worship will be destroyed! Even where announcements are included in the order or worship they are usually at the very end, and nothing but public meetings of the church must be announced. I believe that the Christian sees the world around him as God's world. Further I think most of us believe that we are placed in this world to carry out God's mission. If a Christian does not feel this, then who will? If then, we believe this to be God's world, we must grasp firmly the fact that it is in this world that God's mission is being carried out. If this is true, then announcements of the things of this world have a place in our worship because they constitute *news of God's world!* Because all is God's the church must be knowledgeable about the city and it's problems. Important happenings in *God's local society* are our concern. It is only in the church where what happens in the world is seen in the context of *God's world*, and a sense of mission can be developed toward it! The church, as I have said, must be knowledgeable about these things, therefore announcements are extremely important. I personally feel that in the Order of Worship they should come immediately before the sermon. This makes it possible for us to announce the news of God's world, then, in the midst of the very circumstances of that world, to proclaim the word of God. Further, this order calls for response of the People of God to these circumstances. It is vital that in the very midst of the circumstances of our daily life we think in terms of what God, in this time and place, is saying to us, what action he is asking of us! I have felt very strongly recently that the starting point for urban mission is found at that point where we hear the word of God in the very midst of the phenomena of the world. Therefore, although the content and exact position of the announcement of our concerns may, on the surface, seem to be a very small thing, it is really quite important.

Expo' 70 Theme

There are many other things I would like to discuss but I close this talk with just one thing that may, in a sense, serve as a clue, clarifying our thought regarding urban evangelism. As you all know the theme of Expo '70, the World Exposition, to be held in Osaka in 1970 is *The Progress and Harmony of Mankind.* I was very happy to hear that the NCC is considering taking part either on its own or in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church. I think there are three possible ways of interpreting the suggested theme. It is possible first of all to elect *harmony* without *progress.* The urban phenomenon in Japan has not evolved as a result of foresight and reasoned planning. The problem of political expediency enters here. Therefore, there is a sense in which we ought to oppose an artificial urbanization based alone on government policy. In our factories, "oppose rationalization!" is often used as a struggle slogan. This is usually directed toward rapid automation. We should not enter into such struggles however without examining the meaning behind what we are doing. Essentially, here we are seeking "harmony without progress." We often find rationalization opposed on the grounds of preserving the "good old harmony" of the past. On these grounds the urbanization process is often opposed. In Japan the result here is the preservation of the old concept of community. Let us be clear here — there is absolutely no doubt that the urban phenomenon is destroying the old type of harmony. We must not regard this however as a purely negative process. The old type of community symbolized by kinship relationships *is* being broken up. This is not in itself a bad thing, the problem lies in the fact that to date urban phenomenon has shown

Japanese students in a church in the city of Yokohama discuss plans for a house-to-house visitation program.

little sign of offering a viable alternative. Men become very lonely in the urban situation. However, simply because this is true there is no justification for hindering urbanization in the hopes of preserving the good old harmony of the past.

New Concept of Community

At this stage, where the old community is breaking up and there is still no viable alternative, the church of all groups, has the responsibility of producing a concept of the new community. Therefore we, at least, cannot speak in terms of *harmony without progress*. Certainly there are many problems involved in progress, but harmony without progress is an extremely reactionary position.

Let us turn then to the second possible reaction to the theme. This would stress progress at the expense of harmony. Here, without qualification, urbanization is seen as a good and desirable thing. While it may be true that men suffer to a degree from loneliness and alienation, the benefits far overshadow this. Man earns more and has a richer, fuller life than was ever before possible! However, we really cannot afford urbanization such unqualified reverence! While there is a sense in which the progress of mankind may be described as the "grace of God," we cannot ignore the fact that this very progress is destroying man's harmony. In this we see man's sin. To the very extent that culture progresses, man in fact forfeits harmony and tensions increase. This is a fact that cannot be denied. Therefore, we as Christians cannot without qualification accept either of these two positions.

Expo' Theme As Prayer

Finally, we turn to the third position of seeking progress that embodies harmony. I think there is a prayer inherent in the theme chosen for Expo '70. While the sponsors of the Exposition speak of it as a *festival*, I regard it as more than that; to me it is a prayer! How can mankind achieve progress that embodies harmony? This is man's prayer for the 21st Century and it forms the background for life in our time. Can we through the church and the Christian family come up with something definite that contributes at this point?

Let us give a little more thought to this progress that embodies harmony. How can we promote urbanization at its best? Can we find the way that will enable us to build the right kind of community, and promote that development of urbanization that will not result in loneliness

and human alienation but rather in the blessings of a richer culture? I believe that the church has a decisive role to play in all this and that it must assume that role. If the church fails at this point, then I feel there is no hope for mankind.

Our NCC Urban, Industrial Mission Study Group has the responsibility of exploring ways and means by which the church may fulfill her role in helping human society to experience a valid urbanization where "progress embodies harmony." Further, it must make its findings and opinions heard. All this is not the responsibility of just one denomination but of Christians as a whole and it is in this faith and context that our group must continue to work.

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COVER PHOTO: *People! People! Restless feet, moving, moving. Minds seeking, seeking. How do you reach the moving feet, the seeking mind, the indifferent passerby, the person in your midst? (Crowds outside a temple.)*

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